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### Theatre Alum Experienced Key Stage of Growth at Gardner-Webb

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# Theatre Alum Experienced Key Stage of Growth at Gardner-Webb

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Office of University  
Communications

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## *Nathan Rouse ('02) Credits GWU's Christian Foundation as Major Impact on Life, Career*

Gardner-Webb University provided theatre alumnus Nathan Rouse ('02) with a solid Christian education that has impacted both his work for the stage and his life.

It was the University's Christian foundation, as well as the beauty of its campus and surrounding countryside, that first attracted Rouse to Gardner-Webb from his native Georgia. He credits GWU's role in his spiritual growth, while he majored in theatre and minored in religious studies, as a significant influence on both his career and his relationships with others.

"To be Christlike is, in many ways, to learn to show utmost compassion and empathy to all people," Rouse explains. "The pairing of religious studies and theatre has granted me no end of grace and patience toward others, and I readily attribute the formation and foundation of those virtues to my time at Gardner-Webb."

For Rouse, GWU's faculty also played a major part in making his university experience one that continues to offer numerous benefits today. He cites Professor of Religion Dr. Paula Qualls as one of many examples of faculty mentors who made a difference in his spiritual and academic journeys.

"Her class felt like a home," Rouse relates. "She made everyone who walked into her classes feel free to probe and question and be formed by the Spirit and the teachings, without pressure to conform to a certain path. The religion department planted the seeds of what would become my view of God, the world, and people, equipping me with the means to be a more conscientious follower and, ultimately, imitator of Christ."

Rouse also felt right at home in the theatre department at Gardner-Webb, which offered him a broad scope of opportunities to act, direct, write, design sets and work alongside other students and faculty members who would become lifelong friends, including former theatre faculty member Keith Cassidy.

“He impacted every facet of my theatre life but, more than that, he impacted me as a person, as a man,” Rouse describes. “His grace and patience with students was unparalleled. Where the religion department pushed students’ spirits, Keith pushed students to more ably live in their own skin. He could move a class of theatre students to belly laughs as quickly as he could produce crocodile tears. His teachings still echo through my head and heart now, after all these years, as I produce, direct, perform and live.”

In addition to the many productions he participated in at Gardner-Webb, Rouse fondly recalls being part of the first-ever performance in GWU’s Millennium Playhouse. “The thrill of being a young actor with a captive audience laughing their heads off at an inaugural performance in a new production space is hard to forget,” Rouse relishes. “Those are the kinds of opportunities you get at Gardner-Webb. I spent at least 70-plus percent of my on-campus life in and around the theatre buildings and the students and faculty there.”

Rouse has remained heavily involved in theater and creative productions since completing his studies at Gardner-Webb. In addition to other full-length stage shows and short films through his Charlotte, N.C.-based Starving Artist Productions company, he has become known for his development of “The Birth,” a live nativity story based on the works of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner.

He acknowledges that Gardner-Webb’s broad curriculum and vast opportunities to get involved in activities, through both the theatre program and the campus as a whole, provided a major boost for him.

“In much larger university settings, it would be easy to get lost in the mix, in the theatre department or the University as a whole,” Rouse offers. “The size of Gardner-Webb affords students a much more focused experience, with a wide spectrum of material and roles.”